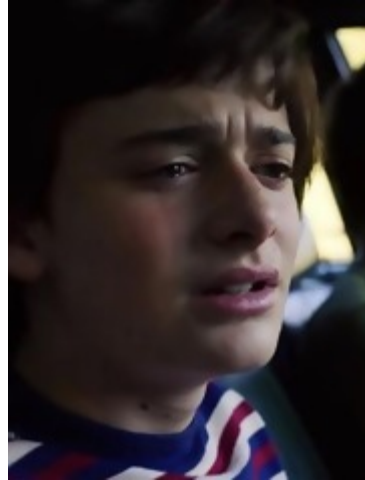




There Are Times by TheRealSokka

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Summary: After the move, life brings a lot of changes for Will and El Byers. Not all of them bad. #Season4Siblings

There Are Times

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This takes place in the same continuation as 'To Grow Up/Apart', for all those who need more Will&El stuff next season as much as I do. If you're here for Byers family/ Party friendship content, there's more than enough to go around, too. Have a good read!

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There are times when Will doesn't want to wake up.

To open his eyes; staring at the still unfamiliar ceiling above him, dreading the moment when he'll have to get up. To know they'll have to go to school that day and there won't be any familiar faces. To lie awake listening to El's muffled cries on the other side of the room and sometimes, on bad days, his mom's when she tries to comfort her.

There are times when he doesn't want to close his eyes, either, for fear of falling asleep. Some small, naïve part of him had hoped that the nightmares would stay behind in Hawkins. They haven't. None of them. The road through Mirkwood; the monster in the shed; the Shadow in the sky; they have all stayed with him, ignoring the change of scenery. Now a new one has joined them: the fight at the mall, only this time it is Hopper who comes out of the ruins, without Joyce by his side. The first time, Will jolts awake bathed in cold sweat and has to sneak over to his mother and brother's rooms, breathing a sigh of relief when he sees their shapes under the covers.

On some nights, El's nightmares happen to wake him before his own can. Hers is always the same: she doesn't talk about it – in those first few days, she rarely ever talks – but he knows it's about Hopper. She cries his name in her sleep. Will wants so badly to find something to say to her, to help. But he always comes up empty.

Living in the city brings a lot of changes. They live in a second storey apartment – purchased comparatively cheap since the heating doesn't

work nine days out of ten. Everything about it is new and unfamiliar: the ceilings are lower, the doors don't creak and Will can't find his way around blindfolded anymore. There is no scorch mark on the carpet, nor the countless light holes in the walls where the hundreds of colourful Christmas lights used to hang. There is a slightly lighter patch of wall paper where perhaps the previous owners hung a picture, but that's it.

There is nothing here to remind him of the monster and the Upside Down. Nothing to remind him of his friends. And now this place is home.

His mother has got a new job. She doesn't have to get up at 5am anymore and now she insists on making them breakfast every morning. The waffles are untoasted, the way El likes them, the egg is runny and the bacon is more often than not burned to a crisp. Joyce has never been the best cook, exactly, but Will always enjoys these new early moments together too much to say anything.

("Jonathan's got the next few days off. Something about a water leak in their workshop.")

"Does that mean he'll make breakfast tomorrow?"

"Will Byers, is that a note of hope I hear in your voice?!"

"No.")

Well, almost always.

Their flat is considerably smaller than the house back in Hawkins. When someone talks anywhere inside, you can hear it in every room. That's how Will catches Joyce and Jonathan arguing about money; how he hears his brother quietly talking to Nancy on the phone (he misses her just as much as Will misses Mike). Most nights, he overhears El tuning the radio to static and trying to slip off in search of Hopper. He doesn't know if she honestly believes she'll find him, but if it helps her deal with it, he won't stop her.

He also hears the first time his mother laughs in forever. It's about something stupid at Jonathan's workplace, Will doesn't quite catch it,

but he also doesn't really care because he is just so relieved to hear that light sound again. For a minute, the shadow that's been hanging over her since the mall seems to lift, just a little.

He hears the quiet conversations El has with Mike over the phone (his first call came literally the minute they arrived) and the small hints of a smile that steal into her voice when she talks with him. And there is the music. From one of his co-workers, Jonathan has caught and brought home a new liking for the band Queen and so, by extension, everyone else has caught it, too. Before long, Will starts humming songs to himself before he falls asleep. One afternoon he catches El doing it, too, and when she notices she blushes and shrugs in a "*What? It's good.*" way.

There are times when this place starts feeling like home.

Routines settle in slowly: waking up, burnt breakfast, taking the bus to school (the big city isn't too bike-friendly, so Lucas' sister has inherited Will's old one), walking side by side through the hallways to get to their shared classes, ducking his head when the older boys there happen to look at him. There's a routine that carried over from Hawkins, isn't it?

El doesn't duck her head. Even without her powers she is not afraid to glare at people, and of course that causes attention and problems. Will has to send her warning glances multiple times, and once forcefully pulls her away after a group of the popular girls snicker behind her back at her colourful rainbow jacket. It was a farewell gift from Max. Will can feel the anger radiating from El, and he knows only half of it actually stems from the girls. "Ignore them." he tells her, anyway.

"Mouthbreathers!" she growls. But strangely enough, she seems to listen to him: with some effort, they make it through the first week without one of the girls losing her teeth, and El her place at the school.

They sit together during their classes. They don't know each other as well as the rest of the Party does, but it's better than sitting alone. This way Will has someone to talk to; he can help her out when she doesn't know the words, or calm her down when some jokers chuck

gum at the back of her head.

They end up sticking together wherever they can; in class, at lunch, in the corridors. It helps having someone there who's been through the same things, to laugh privately at how mundane this all seems now. El at least doesn't seem to mind his company. She is quiet, like him, and they don't have to talk much to understand each other. Every now and then, he manages to make her smile in that gay, honest way that she has, even if it usually disappears again just as quickly. They make it work. And yet Will can never help but feel that Mike should be sitting in his place. He can tell that El misses him a lot. But him and the Party are a world away, and they have to make the best of it.

"Thank you." El says one afternoon on the ride home.

Will has been losing himself in the patterns of rain on the window, so he barely catches it. He blinks away from the intricate, shifting shapes on the glass to look at her. "What for?"

The look she gives him is solemn, but with the smallest hint of a smile at the corners. Her irises are a deep brown in the dull light of the bus, and Will notes, not for the first time, that unlike most people she doesn't break eye contact when she talks. "I don't know. Just thank you."

"Okay. Anytime." Will says, and oddly, even though he doesn't even know what he promises her there, he does know that he means it. The patter of raindrops frames the moment in a quiet sense of calm as El leans her head on his shoulder and closes her eyes.

It's a strange situation. They look somewhat similar and never go anywhere without the other, so people naturally assume that they are twins. They haven't bothered to correct them, and neither has Joyce, so there are a lot of statements along the lines of "*Have you and your sister...?*". It's a strange feeling if Will thinks about it for too long: until a few months ago he didn't even know El; until a few weeks ago he had no idea what she was like without Mike glued to her side. The most that connected him with her before moving here was a hesitant friendship and a stronger, stupid and unvoiced sense of jealousy.

But there are times when someone calls her his sister and he finds himself smiling.

He learns a lot about El during this time. He learns to differentiate her thoughtful silence from the one where she is still struggling for words, and her angry glare from the merely annoyed one that doesn't spell quite so much trouble. He learns that she is rather smart and sharply, unexpectedly funny if she wants to be. Her sense of humour is of a very grim, dark kind and Will finds that at some point his own must have taken a similar turn, because he chuckles at comments of hers that would probably be rather depressing if he'd actually stop to think about them. Maybe being faced with monsters from other dimensions does this to people.

He can't say that he minds too much.

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Of course, this new sense of calm doesn't last very long.

It is their second week of school when the nicknames make a return. Will isn't honestly very surprised; he had expected it. It's no longer 'Zombie Boy', at least, but the other, more familiar slurs. The ones Troy and his cronies used to call him before everything happened. The ones his father threw in his face the night before he left. He had thought that they might sting less now than they did then, but he quickly realizes that was another naïve hope.

He tries to think back what might have prompted the hostilities this time. Maybe someone noticed him not looking at the girls during track, the way every other boy does. Perhaps he should have pretended. Or it is just because he doesn't talk much and doesn't have any friends here; because he is an easy target. In the end, the reason probably doesn't matter. It becomes like an exact repetition of middle school: his locker sprouts taunting notes, he gets tripped and shoved in the hallways and once, when he comes back from swimming and opens his locker, all his clothes are gone. He spends a lot of the days afterwards in the bathrooms, trying his best to steel himself and splashing water into his face to hide the signs that he's been crying.

He isn't entirely successful. El is shaking with anger every time she

sees it happen, and it takes a lot of effort to talk her out of going after every single bully in the school by herself, because what would that accomplish? It would only make things worse. His mother notices that something is wrong, too, but he can't bring himself to tell her how bad it is. They came here to get away from worrying all the time, and Joyce has done more of that than any of them. Mostly about him. So he keeps quiet and takes to plastering a smile onto his face as soon as he enters the flat.

"If you're not going to do anything about it, I will." El says one afternoon. They're on the bus home again and it's raining, again. "I can't just watch them do this to you."

"Just leave it, El." he tries to placate her. "It's not the first time. I'll be okay."

"You're not okay." she states bluntly.

"Yeah, well, none of us are, are we?" He turns to face her. "Or are you going to pretend you're not still calling Hopper every night? Or that mom doesn't still have nightmares? I don't think 'okay' is something we can do."

El goes quiet. Will learns that this is a third kind of her silences: upset. He's never seen this kind before, because an upset El usually simply faces whatever or whoever upsets her head on. But not so with him, and not with this topic. He instantly feels bad having said what he has, but he doesn't know how to take it back. If only Mike were here. He's always been better with words.

"We can."

"What?" Will asks, taking in the stubborn set of El's jaw.

"We can do okay. I miss Jim so much, but I'm not broken. And neither are you."

Sometimes he forgets how perceptive she is, just because she doesn't talk much. In many ways, El is one of the most self-aware people he has ever met. And he believes her when she says she is going to be okay, eventually. He wants her to be; he wants that almost more than

he wants it for himself, because she is such a good person and her trauma is so much worse than his own. El is a fighter; Will knows she'll survive it. He just wishes he could share her confidence.

He wishes more than anything for his friends to be here. For Mike to be here, so that he could say these things where Will doesn't have the words to. So that the two – or three – of them could huddle together on the couch and play stupid games and forget about everything, like they used to. But his friend is miles away in Hawkins and even if he weren't, those days are past. Time to grow up.

There are times when he just wants to curl up and hide.

Then three things happen, all within the span of a few days.

First, Jonathan comes into his room one afternoon and sits him down for a talk. It's a very similar conversation to the one they had after his father left and it ends almost the same way; with Will finally breaking down and crying into his brother's shoulder. He doesn't really feel better afterwards, but Jonathan promises him that it will get better, eventually. That he is right just the way he is, and no one tell him any different. And that no matter what happens; he'll always have him and mom. Will knew that, of course, deep inside, but it's a big difference to hear it once again said out loud in Jonathan's caring, how-could-you-even-think-any-different tone of voice. He wonders not for the first time what he has done to deserve his brother.

Second, the next day he is once again tripped in the hallway and all his books spill from his grasp. That is not new. What is new is the girl who suddenly drops down next to him and helps him collect his books from the ground. Will stares at her in surprise. She has dark skin, matched by the colour of her jacket, hair and eyes, and she has an intense way of looking at him. "Are you okay?" she asks as she hands him his math book.

He nods, bewildered.

The girl cocks her head, studying him for a moment. Then she says, "Don't let them see it bothers you. And stop looking out for them. They'll get bored eventually." With that she is off, slinging her own bag over her shoulder and disappearing into the crowd.

He is so confused by the encounter that he promptly spills everything about it to El right afterwards. She looks just as bewildered. "Maybe not everyone is a mouthbreather," she concludes, and it sounds like she has trouble believing it herself.

Will eventually decides not to look a gift horse in the mouth and just accept the advice he's given. There was something about the girl that makes him trust what she said. Maybe it was the intensity with which she said it, or the controlled look on her face that he knows so well from his own mirror. If she hasn't been on the receiving end of all this herself, she at the very least has witnessed it first-hand. So Will tries his best not to look out for the notes and the tripping feet anymore. Because it is true; he has been doing that like a rabbit would look out for the fox and that likely hasn't helped.

"You look – different." Jonathan comments that evening while they are watching the re-run of *Gremlins*. He doesn't elaborate further and Will only nods absentmindedly, too focused on the screen. It's just the right thing to take his mind of things, he has found. One of the advantages to surviving otherworldly threats is that nobody really minds things like him staying up late to watch movies anymore, which is how he found what might be his new favourite. He can't help but think that his friends would like it, too.

Thirdly, three days after that, the name-calling stops.

Will gets through the entire Thursday without a single slur being thrown at him and it freaks him out more than anything else. At first he thinks it's a fluke. He has tried to follow the mysterious girl's advice and ignore it all, but surely that couldn't have been it. Not like this, from one day to the next.

But then Friday passes the same. No notes on his locker. Not even a single shove in the hallways.

"I think they've lost interest in me?" he tells El at the end of the day, standing at their lockers to collect their books for homework. He didn't mean to frame it as a question, but he's still so wary about this situation that it comes out that way.

"Oh? That's good, isn't it?" El asks with studied interest, flipping

through her biology book and evidently not actually reading in it.

He looks at her suspiciously. "Did you do something?"

"What could I do?" El shrugs. "No powers." She gives him a little nudge and closes her locker. "Come on. Lots of homework."

Will doesn't believe her for a second. For all her ostensible poker face, she is a terrible liar. Probably Mike's fault. Something has definitely happened, and El definitely had something to do with it.

But whatever she has done, it has gotten the target off his back. His fellow pupils aren't suddenly friendly to him exactly, but they have gone back to not noticing him and for that much he is very grateful. Suddenly he can breathe freely again, without the need to look over his shoulder constantly. He spends the first half of the next week thinking about how he can repay El for that. He thinks about buying her a present, but he doesn't even know what she likes. Never mind the fact that she'd probably refuse it anyway, since she still insists that she hasn't done anything at all.

One evening as they sit helping each other with homework, it dawns on him that he has never seen her leave the house unless for school and mandatory shopping. Then he realizes that he hasn't really done that, either. They've been in the city for a month now and they still know next to nothing about it. In a dash of spontaneity, he slams their school book closed, takes El by the arm, gives her a reassuring smile at her confused question and pulls her out of the door and into the streets.

They explore the neighbourhood, which turns out to be a lot more interesting than their old one back in Hawkins. Here, every corner they turn has something going on, whether it's a small shop with neon signs advertising this and that, a group of street artists performing their own versions of popular songs, or a shady looking figure asking them if they wanted to buy obscure substances, likely with varying levels of unhealthiness. Apart from the last one, Will is very intrigued. And El seems a bit overwhelmed; doesn't even know where to look first.

("Why is that man painted yellow?")

"He's an artist, I think. People do that; painting their skin and standing very still, like statues."

"He did that to *himself*?!"

"I think it looks kinda cool."

"It looks stupid. Can he even move?"

"Yes I can, young lady. I can also hear you.")

Will has to stifle a laugh at El's comic bewilderment that the statue-man is talking to her as naturally as any other person on the street would. Of course, she has never seen or heard about people like this. The culture shock of the city that he gets from all this must be ten times worse for her.

The artist doesn't seem to take offense to El's comment; he turns out to be one of the most relaxed people Will has ever met. That's probably a requirement for doing this kind of thing. In fact, he straight up invites the two of them to join him on his pedestal to show El what his odd occupation is about. Will has always liked street art, so he all too gladly takes the man up on his offer and closes his eyes as he carefully paints a dash of red colour on his cheeks. When he opens his eyes again, El's expression has shifted from confused to amused, and he manages to talk her into joining them, too (she ends up with blue cheeks instead of red).

"Okay, now you find a position and stay still for a minute. Then you think up a new one and change into it, but slowly. Like so." The artist demonstrates.

It's surprisingly fun, to think so carefully about every movement and watch the curious expressions of the passers-by as they look at their odd trio. A few stop to watch, or drop coins into the artist's case. There are also those who snicker derisively or otherwise make fun of them as they walk past, but to Will's surprise he finds that it doesn't faze him. How could it, when those people don't have the first clue what this feels like, or how much he enjoys it? They don't even know what they're laughing at.

He turns his head in slow motion and sees that El has done the same, the blue on her cheek having been joined by a streak of gold while Will wasn't looking. She looks good in paint, and happy, eyes alight with mirth. Then, as if they had planned it, they both simultaneously stick out their tongues at the other. And, because everything about this is ridiculous, they break down laughing right afterwards.

It's the unbothered, full-belly kind of laughter that Will had almost forgotten how it felt like.

(Later they discover that the paint is not easy to get rid of at all. Joyce has to sit them both down in the bathtub and get to work with a brush. "Whose brilliant idea was this?" she inquires, trying to look cross. She isn't very good at that and neither of them buys it.)

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The monster chases him out of a nightmare and he jolts upright in his bed, breathing going heavy. He can still feel the claws digging into his skin.

As he calms down and his breathing begins to normalize, he hears the same noises of distress from the other side of the room. El is twisting and turning in her bed, her covers all crumpled with the force of her own private hell.

For the first time, Will crosses over to her and shakes her gently. El grips his arm; her eyes fly open, wide and afraid, before they settle on him and recognize where she is. Then she breathes a sigh of relief. Will sits down on her bed, nudging her to make space. She looks at him and nods, wanting for company as much as he does.

They talk through the night and almost until the sun comes up, about everything and nothing. The next morning finds them sleep deprived and with one simple, crucial insight: neither of them has to be alone.

Soon after that, a sleeping bag finds its way into their bedroom. Whichever one of them needs it will simply drag it over to the other's bed, so that they can whisper reassurance to each other, or simply find it in the other's closeness. Because the nightmares clearly are not going away, so they might as well take them on together.

There are times when he thinks they are the same kind of damaged.

There are times when this starts to feel like healing.

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One Saturday morning in October – the sun is just rising over the buildings, the air is already warm in a promise/threat of the heat that is to come; a weekend day like any other – Will goes to answer the doorbell, expecting the postman, and is suddenly faced with a bright, colourful dress and a blazing mop of curly red hair. Half a second later, that hair is all he can see as he is wrapped up in a crushing hug that threatens to squeeze all air out of him. "Max! Can't breathe!" he manages, survival instinct overcoming his surprise.

The redhead releases him and steps back a step. She looks a little flustered, but good; more tanned than before and without the red bruises under her eyes. "Sorry. It's good to see you, Byers. I wasn't sure I'd found the right place."

It turns out she has taken the bus all the way from Hawkins, without telling anything about it to Joyce, El or her parents. The latter she only mentions in half-a-sentence, not quite meeting his eyes as she does, and Will recognizes the signs well enough not to inquire. Over the summer the old Byers home had sort of become a safe space for Max when her father or step-brother went off the rails, and Will doesn't see why their new one should be any different. With a smile, he steps aside to let the redhead inside.

And, well, if he thought her welcome for him was enthusiastic, her and El's reaction when they see each other tops it by a mile. Firstly, there is considerably more screaming. Then, after the initial crushing hug – during which Max manages to pick El up despite the fact that his sister is almost a head shorter than her – they spend a good ten minutes in the other's arms, chattering non-stop, and Will decides to just lean back and watch it happen. He doesn't really know how or why the two of them got so close, but they have been almost inseparable during the last two months in Hawkins and distance doesn't seem to have changed that.

Finally they disentangle themselves and Max grins. "Well, what are

you waiting for? Show me around the new place."

El and Will exchange a glance. Will rubs his neck sheepishly. "There isn't all that much to show. You're looking at most of it."

"Ah." She spins once around her own axis, taking everything in. Suddenly she frowns and turns back to Will. "I can't see any drawings."

Will shrugs. "Haven't made any new ones yet. School has been busy."

"That sucks. It's not really The Byers House without a Will Byers work of art." She looks around again. "So everything takes place in these bare 30 square meters of nothing here?"

"Well...yeah."

"That's depressing." Max concludes. "You guys need to get out for once. Are there any nice shops in the neighbourhood we can raid?"

"Yes! I found a big shop full of shoes only three streets away." El says excitedly, her eyes aglow.

"But first," Will jumps in quickly, because the prospect of being dragged into a footwear store by the two girls is frightening, "we go somewhere else. It's mandatory."

Max raises an eyebrow. "Really? And what place would that be?"

"The arcade."

It's comical to see the way her eyes go wide. "You still have an arcade here?!"

"Right around the block." Will confirms smugly.

He has happened upon it purely by happenstance; it is quite well hidden in between two larger supermarkets. Frankly, he is surprised it is still going: the small arcade in Hawkins had closed in spring, even before they had moved, due to lack of customers. Apparently the thousands of pennies him and his friends have left there hadn't been enough to save the business. Supposedly it's the same across the

country. So the odds of finding a healthy, running arcade right here in their new neighbourhood had been slim to none.

So far he hasn't been in there, and neither has he told El about it. She has never been to the arcade, and he figured that someone of Max's enthusiasm could make it more fun for her than he could. So he had held off and now, three days afterwards, Max is standing right here in their living room. Maybe it was meant to be.

"You are so fucking lucky." Max sighs blissfully. "I can't wait, let's go."

"I've – never been to an arcade." El says, blushing. "So – we don't go to the shoe store?"

"You can still do that later." Will assures her. *Without me*, he silently adds.

"But arcade is more important?"

"El, if you ever have the choice between a clothing store and an arcade, you choose the arcade. There's not even a question." Max says sagely.

"No question whatsoever." Will agrees.

"No question." El repeats, a smile stealing onto her face. "Okay."

The arcade turns out to be as run-down as one would expect, but the machines work and, almost more importantly at this time of year, so does the air-conditioning. There are too many games to choose from and Will has a great time, alternating between trying to beat Max at *Space Invaders* (which turns out to be impossible) and watching her trying to teach El the mechanics of *Pacman*. His sister can't fathom why the ghosts are stronger than her big yellow ball, or why she should keep it alive in the first place if it keeps eating the cute little specks on screen. She dies a lot. But El is also nothing if not stubborn, so she keeps yanking at the controls with silent fury and eventually yells in triumph as she manages to clear a stage. The look of pride on Max's face is almost cute to watch.

They move through a handful of other games, leaving quite a bit of their money behind, but Will decides he'll worry about that later. As

Max says: "Enjoy now, regret never."

She stays the night, and most of the next day, and they spend the time exploring, talking and sharing news, songs and movies that the other side hasn't caught yet. Will had almost forgotten how funny Max's blunt, no-nonsense commentary could be. Apparently Dustin has gotten a job at the *Post* – there were a lot of open spaces for reporters after this summer – and isn't doing too badly under Nancy's guidance. Lucas has joined the school's track team, for which Max is absolutely not proud of him. And Mike spends most of his days moping. But that assessment comes from Max, and the translation of that would be that he's being quiet and is most likely writing a lot; in other words, being Mike. Life moves on and they're okay, or trying to be.

The call from Max's mother comes late that evening, having by that point exhausted all other places where her daughter could be. By then El, Joyce and even Jonathan have already gone to bed and it's just her and Will on the living room couch, debating what movie to watch next when the phone rings. Will only catches his friend's end of the conversation, but from the careful way Max is talking, her mother must be beside herself. He sees guilt cross his friend's face, and then a brief spell of anger. When she hangs up and returns to the couch, he doesn't know how to read her expression.

"You okay?" Will asks slowly.

Max gives a strained smile. "Sure. Always am. I should really get back, though. Mom's worried, and Neil..." she trails off. "Well, I better get going."

She stands up to gather her small bag that contains the only handful of things she's brought. Will can only assume her father has blown a fuse again; it wouldn't be the first time. He escorts Max to the door, trying to make sense of his friend's suddenly rigid, controlled posture. Then, right at the door, she stops suddenly, fingers still on the handle. Her shoulders slump in an almost defeated way that is utterly unlike her, and much to Will's alarm she doesn't resist when he worriedly turns her back around. Her face is oddly empty.

"Max?" he asks carefully.

"God, I don't want to go back there." she mutters.

Will wordlessly steps forward and embraces her in a hug. The desperate way in which she hugs back confirms what he'd suspected; his friend is still far from okay, and her mouth breather of a father clearly isn't helping matters. Will runs his hand down her back, the way his mother always does when he is upset. Max doesn't move, just stays in the hug, which is the last thing that confirms she is definitely not okay.

She does have every right not to be. Her step-brother died, dammit – and yes, he was a bit of an asshole, but in the end, before his death, he came around and saved El from the Mind Flayer. He died in Max's arms, and evidently it has left scars on his tough, brave friend. The least her parents could do is be there for her, but evidently that is not happening. Will's embrace around her tightens. He's never been one to advocate violence, but right in this moment he feels an overwhelming urge to punch that man who calls himself her father. This must be how Jon feels about Lonnie.

"Fuck." Max breathes into his shoulder, finally giving a life sign.

"You don't have to go if you don't want, Max."

"No, it's okay. I can deal with it. Really." She sniffs and pulls away, straightening up, and looks a little more than the Max he knows, with stubborn resolve radiating from her. "Thanks. It's just a little tough right now."

"You know you can talk to Lucas if you need to, right?" he tells her gently.

Max starts to shake her head and then turns it into a vague shrug. "Yeah. I mean, it's not really a boyfriend thing; we don't do this touchy-feely kind of stuff..."

"Max. Seriously." Will admonishes firmly. He loves his friend, and in many ways he admires her, but sometimes her stubbornness really does reach the point of being an illness. "There's nothing wrong with letting people who care for you know that you're not okay yet. Believe me. What do we have a Party for, otherwise?"

"There's still a Party?" she asks drily, raising her eyebrows.

"Of course there is!" Will has asked himself the same question a lot. He's never had an answer until now. *This*, right here, is what their group, their friendship is about, and distance doesn't change a thing about that. "We can still help each other out. The Party just parted ways for a while; that happens all the time in campaigns."

"You know I don't even play that game."

"But you're still our Zoomer."

Max opens her mouth and closes it again without saying anything. It's not often that Will sees her lost for words. Then comes a low mutter: "Are you supposed to be this good and sentimental?"

His face flushes. "They – they do call me Will the Wise." he deflects.

"Idiot." she complains, hitting his shoulder fondly. But her eyes have lost their blank look and sparkle with humour, and that tells him he's said the right thing.

An unexpected rush of joy surges through him at that realization: For once in his life, he might have actually helped someone. Even though he hasn't even done anything besides telling his friend the truth.

"So, talk to Lucas once you get back." he repeats, clearing his throat. "Just trust me on this, alright?"

"Oh, if you fucking insist. The idiot won't have much to add, but maybe I'll give it a go."

"Promise?"

"Yeah yeah, okay, I promise! Jesus, you're relentless." A smile quirks the corners of Max's lips. "I think El is rubbing off on you."

Will has to smile, too. "Maybe. I don't mind."

"Right you are. That was a compliment." She opens the door this time, resolutely stepping through. "Right; thanks for having me. And for the pep talk. Tell El I love her and such and such. You're

obviously more suited to the touchy-feely stuff than I am."

Will snorts. "If you say so. You're okay getting home?" he inquires, two questions phrased in one.

"I'll just take the bus. Put it on Neil's tab." she replies, answering both.

She waves goodbye and he returns it, following her into the stairwell. A few seconds later, a grin steals onto his face when he hears the redhead's voice drift up to him: "And make sure the arcade is still there next time!"

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Summer turns into fall, and things start to settle.

Will focuses on his schoolwork, which has gotten more demanding now in high school. El has taken a liking to basketball and spends her free time practicing down in the yard behind the building. Every Friday, the Byers celebrate the weekend with an evening of card games (Jonathan usually wins). Will starts looking forward to those evenings.

He isn't afraid to go to sleep anymore.

El and Max have set up a steady correspondence of letters, probably talking at length about girl stuff that Will is very glad he's not involved in. Sometimes he can hear his sister laugh and he knows that she's reading another one of Max's reports, probably saying something sarcastic about either of their boyfriends. El laughs more now; she appears more relaxed and carefree in general. Max does her good, and perhaps so do her and Will's exploration tours through the city, which have become a frequent thing and on which they have yet to run out of things to see. Will enjoys having El by his side: with her there, he feels more confident in these great, moving masses of people than he could ever be in Hawkins. And El usually comes back from these excursions smiling.

She doesn't call for Hopper anymore.

Every now and then, Will's supercom crackles to life with Dustin's voice, his friend asking how they're doing and excitedly reporting on

the crazy stories he is uncovering for the *Hawkins Post* – which don't sound all that crazy compared to anything they've been through themselves. But Dustin's enthusiasm practically jumps out of the com whenever he talks about it, and it brings a smile to Will's face. Lucas doesn't call quite as often, but Will stays informed about what he's up to through Max's letters. Apparently he's serious about school work and spends a lot of his time on it, already aiming for one of the more prestigious colleges. Needless to say, his girlfriend's letters don't refrain from good-naturedly mocking him for it. Which means Max is not letting herself get dragged down anymore, either.

There are times when he feels an absurd surge of pride at how well everyone is getting on, despite everything that happened.

He hasn't thought about Mike in a long time.

It's a sort of complicated situation: his best friend has been a part of him for as long as Will can remember, so of course he could never really forget him, nor does he want to. He loves him. But there is so much happening in his life now, and... Well. Something broke there, in the rain, and neither of them has really attempted to repair it, to truly put it back together. They're still friends, but it's not quite the same and he can tell that Mike feels that, too.

Will is resolved to make the best of it. Mike has always been his lifeline back to a shore of normality and safety. He will forever be grateful to him for that and he is pretty sure he would have drowned at some point without it – but it also tied him inextricably to Hawkins. So having it cut for them was probably a good thing.

But if it wasn't clear by this point; life does love to throw Will Byers curve balls.

It's a Wednesday evening when the phone rings, and Will knows just from the timing that it's Mike. He hands the receiver over to El and retreats into his room to give the two of them some privacy. After all, he knows how long and intimate their conversations can get.

So he is a little surprised when, only a minute later, his sister is standing in his doorway. "Your turn." she says, holding the receiver out to him.

"What do you mean, my turn?"

"To talk to Mike."

"Why?" Will asks in alarm.

El crosses her arms. "Because you haven't talked since we moved." She holds out the receiver insistently. "Talk to him."

The thing is, she is right. Whenever Mike does call, he – understandably – wants to talk to El for as long as possible. It's obvious how much they miss each other. And Will – well, if he's honest with himself, he has kind of been avoiding those calls. Mike was one of the very few things that made him endure Hawkins, after all, and he figured that the less he heard of him, the less likely his mind would be to go back and remember all the bad stuff. At least, that is the reason he is going with.

But he can handle it. He raises the receiver to his ear. "Hello?"

"Will!" Mike's voice jumps out. The mix of surprise and joy in that one word instantly makes Will's heart clench painfully. So much for handling it. "It's so good to hear you. How're you doing?"

"I'm fine. We're fine." he manages. "Didn't you want to talk to El?"

"No, no. I mean, yes, but I wanted to talk to you, too. Is that – is that alright?" comes the uncertain question.

"Yes. It's – good to hear you, too." Will replies honestly. Because he can't describe the feeling that blossoms in his chest at hearing his best friend's voice again as anything other than good. Even though it's probably dangerous.

"Good. Yeah." Will can practically *hear* Mike's nervous pacing around the room on the other end, and he can't help the surge of affection that rises in his chest at the image. He wonders if Mike knows his reaction by heart just the same. Then his friend's voice takes him out of those musing: "...sorry that I took so long to call you. I did want, it's just – I wanted to hold off til I had something, you know?" Mike's excited smile is an audible thing. "But I do now."

What? "What are you talking about?" Will subconsciously leans forward on the chair. His friend's voice rings with promise. "What do you have?"

"Oh, nothing remarkable." Mike clears his throat. "Only the best D&D campaign ever written."

"What?!" Will blurts out. "But..."

"I've spent weeks on this thing; we're going to need at least ten hours to beat it."

"Mike..."

"You and El can come to Hawkins for one night, right?" Mike asks hopefully. "I've got Dustin Lucas and Steve on board; even Max said she wanted to give it a try. I made them not tell, so that it's a surprise. Would you come?"

Will's jaw clenches. "I thought you didn't do campaigns anymore." he states bluntly. Much as he doesn't want it to, the memory of his last attempt still stings.

"Yeah, well, I've got a lot of time on my hands, and..." There's a long pause. "I miss it. Everyone just being together, you know?"

Of course Will knows. He has done such a good job accepting it so far, and then Mike just comes along and makes promises like this.

"And I miss you." Mike says, so gently. "I've got something to make up to you, don't I? I didn't mean what I said, and I'm starting to think growing up is totally overrated, anyway. So what do you think? Kids again, just for one evening?"

Part of Will wants to giddily jump up and yell "Yes!" into the receiver.

The other part just answers, "I'll think about it." And hangs up the phone.

Will lets his hand linger on the receiver for a moment. Then a laugh bursts from his lips.

"What was that?" El asks from the doorframe. Apparently she has been there the entire time. She looks at him curiously. "Did you just hang up on him?"

"Yes." He giggles again. "We're invited to a new campaign. Weeks in the making, he said. He wanted to know if we could come over."

"Oh?" El cocks her head to the side. "You're going to say yes, right?"

"Of course."

"So why didn't you just tell him that?"

"Because just this once I want Mike to be the one wondering and worrying what the answer is going to be." It's childish and he knows it, but then Mike himself was the one who said growing up were overrated. And Will loves his friend, he does, but Mike has – mostly unwittingly – put him through such emotional turmoil multiple times over the years; he owes him a little fun at his expense. A bit of recompense. Just a little bit.

The phone starts ringing again.

El raises an eyebrow. "So I guess I'm not answering, then?"

"No." Will grins. "Just give it a few minutes. Or hours."

"This is so stupid." El decides. She turns back into her room. "Wake me up once you're done; you've got to teach me how to play D&D."

"Will do." he calls back gleefully. He does look forward to that evening. But Mike doesn't need to know that quite yet.

He finds that he is completely strung high with energy; going to sleep would be impossible. For almost half an hour he fidgets around his room, searching for an outlet. Out of an impulse, he opens the drawer of his desk, finding a stack of blank pieces of paper staring at him. Five seconds later, they are on his desk and a pencil is poised in Will's right hand and without him even thinking about it, it starts to move across the page.

You see, he lied to Max. There has been more than enough time to sit

down and draw since they arrived here, if he'd really wanted to. But the truth is; he hasn't so much as touched a crayon since the Mind Flayer. Every time he tried, it just wound up creating the same dark, twisted shapes as before. So he hasn't wanted to draw for a long time.

But now he doesn't want to stop. Or perhaps it's more accurate to say that he can't stop: it's like his arm has a mind of its own, racing across the page and drawing up shapes that have barely even entered Will's head. He forgets about everything around him after a while.

"Honey? What are you doing? It's late." a sleepy voice yawns behind him.

He hasn't even heard his mother enter the room, so absorbed was he in his task. He finally manages to tear away and his cheeks flush as he turns around. "Sorry. I just..." He doesn't finish the sentence. He wouldn't even have known how.

Joyce carefully leans over his shoulder, inspecting the blue-grey colouring. For once there is no worry in her posture, just curiosity. "What is it?"

Will follows her gaze. The paper is covered in the familiar dark colours – but this time the scene has nothing to do with the Upside Down. It's just a rectangular black surface, criss-crossed with intricate patterns and occasional spots of brighter colours: the patter of rain on a bus window.

He meets his mother's curious eyes. How to explain why this is important; what those moments with El have started and how he might not be here now without them. Without her, and Max, and Jon, and his mom. And Mike.

"I'm glad we moved." he says, because that is the only thing that comes close to summing it up.

Whatever answer Joyce has expected, that clearly isn't it. She gives him a surprised, searching look. "You're glad? Really?"

"Yes. I think it worked out, mom."

Only afterwards will he understand how much this simple

reassurance means to Joyce. It brings a smile to her face; the warm kind that only his mom can really do. After everything that happened, it is so good to see her smile like this again. For Will, it brings with it the certain feeling that everything will be alright. "I think so, too." she agrees, pulling him into a hug. Her hand ruffles affectionately through his hair. "I love you, sweetie."

"I love you too." he returns, with more certainty behind those four words than anything he has ever said.

Joyce draws her hand briefly across his drawing, giving it a fond look. Then she leaves his room as quietly as she entered it. "Don't stay up too long." she says as she pulls the door closed.

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After that, Will rarely ever leaves the house without his sketchpad anymore. In time, more drawings join the first: A phone receiver, guarded by a sword and a staff. A girl in black, kneeling down to pick up a book. A morning sun, half obscured by a head of red hair, its colour mixing with the sunrise. El, with blue and gold paint across her cheek. Moments of surprise and joy, so unexpected that every one of them lingers in his memory in perfect detail.

He is colouring in the latter one, sitting at a small table at the back of the school's cafeteria and carefully drawing the blue crayon across the page, when he chances to look up and sees her again: The girl from the hallway sits down a few tables away from him, all by herself. She is still wearing the same black clothes, but her hair is tinted yellow now, at the tips. Her fork pokes at the cantina food – fish with unidentifiable-brownish-mass – listlessly.

Will watches her for a minute or so. It's strange that this is only the second time he's seen her; the school isn't that big. But be that as it may, he is not the same as he was when she first helped him; too much has happened since then and he can't let this opportunity pass. Taking a moment to gather up his courage, he stands up and walks over to her table. He clears his throat hesitantly. "Uh...hey."

The girl lifts her head, eyes scanning him warily for a moment. Then recognition lights in her eyes and a smile appears on her face. "Oh,

hey there. William, right?"

"You know my name?" Will says in surprise. The one time they met he hasn't even said a word to her, much less had the time or courage to introduce himself.

She shrugs. "The name tag in your algebra book."

"Oh. Right." He rubs his neck sheepishly. He is really not good at this. "I just. I just wanted to say thank you. For helping me."

"Don't mention it. They're leaving you alone now?"

"Yeah, apparently they are." Will tries to read her expression. "I tried to follow what you said, and then a few days later it just stopped. I didn't think it would be that easy."

"Sometimes it can be."

This girl is better at hiding what she thinks than El is, but still Will catches the hint of something more behind the innocent answer: for a second, it almost seems as if she too knows something that she isn't saying. Then the moment is gone and the girl gives him a nod. "I've been there, too. So if what I said helped a little bit, I'm glad." She breaks eye contact and looks down at her food, and somehow that makes her statement seem very final, like this is the end of the conversation.

Will doesn't want it to be, though. Everything about this girl is fascinating him and he still hasn't properly made her help up to her. "You know, you kinda have an advantage over me." he blurts out.

"Oh?" She looks up again. There's an almost playful undertone in her voice. "Which is that, tell?"

Will secretively breathes out a sigh of relief. It only occurred to him after the words left his mouth that she might think him pushy – it's probably weird to be so drawn to someone you have only met once. But she strikes him as a person who would say that to his face if that were what she thought, so, with a confidence he didn't know he had, he pushes on: "You know my name, but I don't know yours. I don't want to keep referring to you as 'the girl who helped me'."

Something flickers across the girl's face then, gone too fast to make out. "That's a nicer name than most people call me. But alright; William," she holds out her hand, "I'm Sarah. Nice to meet you."

"Likewise." Will shakes her hand, and notices that each of her nails is painted a different colour. "No one really calls me William, though. My friends just call me Will."

A raised eyebrow: "Oh, so we're friends now, are we?"

"Uh-" he stammers, caught off guard. "Sorry, that's not what I – I didn't mean to..."

"Relax, I'm just teasing." Sarah chuckles. She cocks her head to the side. "Mostly. But would you want to be, though?"

Will blinks. "Your friend, you mean?"

"Mhm. You seem pretty alright, William, and, well, you wouldn't exactly have much competition." Sarah gestures at her lone table.

She shares El's tendency to get straight to the point, apparently. Will is transported years back, to a boy and a swing set. He has to smile, and doesn't have to think for even a second: "Yeah. Yeah, I would like to be your friend."

Sarah grins, revealing a row of dimples around her mouth. "Awesome."

It feels like a huge occasion, even though it's only a few words exchanged. But it's such a different feeling; meeting Sarah's intelligent eyes and knowing that they're *his friend's* intelligent eyes. If that makes sense. Probably not. If he'd have to explain it to anyone else in this room, he wouldn't know how to.

His new friend leans across the table, lowering her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "Hey, you wouldn't by chance happen to know your way around algebra? I've always wanted a friend who could help me out with that shit."

"Uh, no, I'm afraid you'll have to keep looking." Will answers in the negative.

"Dammit. There you go crushing all my hopes and dreams, less than a minute into our friendship. That's not a good start."

"Oh, I'm so sorry." Will teases back. He's surprised at how easy this comes. Sarah is easy to talk to. "What can I do to make it up to you?"

She makes a face and glances down at her still almost-untouched plate. "Help me identify this brown stuff; be my food taster? Cause I think the cooks are trying to poison us."

Will carefully pokes at it with the fork. The whatever-it-is makes a squishy sound as he withdraws it again. "Yeah; no. I'd play it safe and just get the fries next time."

"The fries that look and taste like melted plastic thrown in the blender? Those ones?"

"The very same."

Their eyes meet, serious expressions slowly turning into grins. Sarah throws him an appreciative nod. "Oh well, fuck algebra, anyway. At least I can commiserate with you over canteen food."

"What about canteen food?" El asks, walking up to them carrying a platter of the very same. She glances interestedly from Will to his new acquaintance to the brown mass on her plate.

"Hey." Will pulls over a third chair from a nearby table, gesturing for her to sit down. "We're just complaining about this stuff, that's all. You remember the girl who helped me with my books a while back?" He gestures between the two of them. "This is Sarah. Sarah; my sister, El."

"Hey, El." Sarah nods. "Nice to meet you."

"Same." El shrugs and sits down at their table, like they were doing this every day. They have to make quite the odd sight: black-clad Sarah with her yellow hair tips, El with her violently colourful dress, and unremarkable little him in between those two. It probably couldn't look more mismatched if they tried. Will feels a grin spreading over his face, and immediately finds his new friend returning it. Then he catches his sister's eye and she responds with a

raised eyebrow – he's gotten good at reading those, too. This one says
"Alright. This is strange, but let's run with it anyway."

There are times when Will thinks they might just be okay.